

# USAID/OTI Venezuela Field Report

April-June 2006

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## Program Description

In August 2002, USAID initiated a program in Venezuela to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen the country's fragile democratic institutions. The Venezuela program, which operates out of the U.S. Embassy, is part of a larger U.S. government effort to promote democratic stability in Venezuela. The FY 2006 budget for Venezuela is \$3.6 million.

The Venezuela program has two main objectives: (1) strengthen democratic institutions and promote space for democratic dialogue; and (2) encourage citizen participation in democratic processes. USAID supports five implementing partners: Development Alternatives, Inc. (DAI), which focuses on dialogue, public debate, citizen participation and training for democratic leadership; the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), which offer technical assistance for political parties as a means to strengthen democratic institutions; Freedom House, which provides technical support to human rights practitioners; and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), which provides support to civil society.

## Country Situation

**Difficult working relations between the US and Venezuelan Governments** – The antagonistic relationship between the U.S. Government (USG) and the Government of Venezuela (GoV) is a challenge for operations in Venezuela. The primary objective in this environment is to develop projects that bring together supporters of the opposition whose constant public discourse brands anything to do with the U.S. as malevolent and anti-Venezuelan. As an example, part of the official government electoral strategy for the December presidential election calls for government supporters to publicly label those in the opposition as "bushistas."

President Chavez continues to rail against the "Empire" for its "invasion plans" and "assassination plots," all of which the Embassy vigorously denies. Visits by the U.S. Ambassador to the inauguration of new USAID-supported project sites in Caracas and the interior are frequently accompanied by crowds of protestors. The projects, however, are well-received by the community and community leaders - those not prodded by the government – who often request additional USAID projects in the neglected neighborhoods in Venezuela.

**Other sources of political tensions** – Domestic political tensions remain high in the run up to the Presidential elections in December 2006. While President Chavez announced his candidacy months ago, the opposition continues to be divided over central issues including even whether to participate in the elections and which person would be a unifying candidate. The GoV continues to denounce purported plots by the USG to promote abstention, while simultaneously accusing the "Empire" of being involved in selecting an opposition unity candidate.

The National Assembly named a new national electoral council following a process of consultation with civil society. Four of the five members selected by the Assembly are open supporters of the government, while the political leanings of the fifth are unclear. As part of the new council's outreach efforts, they agreed to enter discussions with several major universities to carry out an audit of the electoral rolls, which many suspect of not being completely reflective of reality. However, the council was unwilling to release certain information to the universities, so, instead, they decided to work with a group of smaller universities widely perceived as being aligned with the government. The electoral council did agree to allow three of the opposition presidential candidates to observe the audit.

A proposed law to regulate international cooperation is making its way through the National Assembly and could pass as soon as August. The law will require all civil society organizations to register with a to-be-created government entity, headed by President Chavez. This new entity will have the authority to audit all organizations and closely monitor their activities - as well as manage all funding and technical assistance intended for civil society organizations. Many civil society and international organizations see it as an attempt by the International Relations committee of the National Assembly to control civil society. The committee denies that this is their intent.

## OTI Highlights

### A. Narrative Summary

PADF signed four grants to Venezuelan civil society organizations during the second quarter to support judicial transparency, citizen's rights of participation, access to the justice system, and judicial rights of the prison population.

NDI and IRI continue to carry out training activities throughout the country, focusing on party strengthening at the state level and deemphasizing Caracas. They report that the training is being enthusiastically received, particularly by the younger party leaders, many of whom have been feeling marginalized by the central leadership.

Freedom House continues to assist Venezuelan human rights organizations and practitioners, exposing them to strategies employed by human rights defenders in other countries, and increasing their institutional capacity.

USAID has launched a national program to increase citizen participation in government at the local level. The program has two basic elements: 1) support for citizen participation in municipal and community planning councils and 2) training for democratic leadership ("Democracia Entre Nosotros"). The launch has been more modest than planned, however, due to severe funding constraints.

### B. Grants Activity Summary

USAID, through its DAI mechanism in Venezuela, has approved 288 activities totaling \$7,442,301, and has leveraged \$2.5 million in local contributions. Through DAI, USAID has worked with 218 different groups in 21 states with several nationwide activities, including a center for autistic persons, computer training centers for low-income youth, and several little league teams.

### C. Indicators of Success

The small-activity component managed through DAI is achieving its objective of providing a neutral space for supporters of both the government and the opposition to work together to resolve shared issues. A lesson learned is that the more practical the issue, the more likely that people will put aside political differences for the common good (e.g. trash, water, issues that impact women). For example, negotiating skills training is provided to a large group of female informal vendors in one of the state capitals. With technical assistance provided by the NGO partner, the group has come to an agreement with the mayor and a local bank to buy and rehabilitate a vacant building where the women will set up their businesses in a more dignified setting. Another project focused on training journalists in the skills needed to carry out effective investigative journalism. One of the trainees recently won the first prize for investigative journalism given by IPYS (Institute for Press and Society) and Transparency International for a story on corruption in Venezuela.

President Chavez's constant message that citizens must become participants in their own governance has gained wide acceptance. USAID is supporting this concept by increasing opportunities for NGOs to work with citizens through workshops on how the mechanisms for participation operate at the municipal level. The demand for such training far exceeds USAID's financial capacity.

USAID's social impact projects (e.g. aid to nurseries, centers for the handicapped, support for Little League teams, and the like) provide the ambassador with opportunities to demonstrate the concern of the American people for those in Venezuela. The public response to these projects has been primarily very positive. To date, the ambassador has inaugurated 46 USAID-funded social impact projects, totaling \$1.2 million. News of these projects has reached the overwhelming majority of Venezuelans through various media.

## Program Appraisal

The Venezuela program is similar to USAID programs in other countries in this hemisphere and around the world. The program is succeeding against the original goals set out nearly four years ago, which were to reduce political tensions and to help the country work toward democratic stability. Although Venezuela remains a fragile democratic state, where free speech, rule of law, and civil society are under threat, the USAID program continues to seek to strengthen democracy so that all people can express their opinions freely in an open society.

The program in Venezuela is designed to strengthen civil society and political parties, the key components to a healthy democracy. Both groups are channels through which citizens express their desires, frustrations and concerns toward issues and find ways to correct them or continue the things they like.

For the past three and a half years, USAID has focused on increasing dialogue between the opposition and the supporters of President Chavez to reduce these societal and political tensions, and to strengthen democratic structures. Since the program started, USAID has facilitated nearly 1,400 meetings, forums or workshops, involving over 100,000 people.

## **Next Steps/Immediate Priorities**

TEExpand DAI's support to human rights organizations in close collaboration with Freedom House (which is providing the technical support).

In the event that no additional funding is received by the end of July, it will be necessary to begin laying off staff at DAI.

*For further information, please contact:*

In Washington, D.C: Russell Porter, LAC Program Manager, 202-712-5455, [rporter@usaid.gov](mailto:rporter@usaid.gov).